

VZCZCXRO7561

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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 150636Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY MADRID
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0937
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1535
RUEHLA/AMCONSUL BARCELONA 4058
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC
RUCNFB/FBI WASHDC
RUEILB/NCTC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHMD/USDAO MADRID SP

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MADRID 000707

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

PASS TO EUR/WE'S ALEX MCKNIGHT AND STACIE ZERDECKI

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PINR PINS PREL PTER SP FR

SUBJECT: SPAIN: A SLEW OF ARRESTS FURTHER WEAKENS ETA

REF: A. MADRID 499
1B. MADRID 272
1C. MADRID 139
1D. 08 MADRID 1231

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On the eve of its 50th anniversary, the Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) terrorist group has suffered yet another series of operational and legislative blows. On July 4, French and Spanish authorities arrested three suspected members of ETA in Pau, France. Spanish Interior Minister Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba hailed the operation in contributing to a total of 18 arrests of suspected ETA members in 22 days, a tally which includes the June 25 arrests in Paris of the alleged chief and deputy of ETA's intelligence apparatus. In a July 1 joint press conference with visiting DHS Secretary Napolitano, Rubalcaba attributed Spain's recent success in arresting a slew of ETA members to both increased effectiveness of cooperation with France and the increasing weakness of ETA. Meanwhile, ETA was set back on June 30 when the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) upheld the Spanish judiciary's 2003 ban on various incarnations of ETA's political wing. Nevertheless, ETA has concluded a recent reflection period and reaffirmed its commitment to a campaign of violence. On June 19, the terrorist group claimed its first victim of 2009, demonstrating that it remains capable of lethal attacks. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) ETA was founded as a political organization on July 31, 1959 and in 1968 began a campaign of violence to achieve its goal of creating an independent Basque Country. Since then, ETA's attacks have claimed more than 800 victims and wounded thousands, although in recent years the group's operational capacity has become just a shadow of its former self. While ETA already was weakened and divided (See Refs), a series of operations by Spanish and French security services in recent weeks have foiled a number of ETA plots and resulted in a number of high-profile arrests, which very likely is further demoralizing the terrorist group.

¶3. (SBU) On July 4, French and Spanish authorities arrested three suspected ETA members in Pau. Rubalcaba hailed the operation in contributing to a total of 18 arrests of suspected ETA members in 22 days, adding that these latest three were "among the most active, if not the most active"

within the Basque terrorist group. Asier Borreo, whom Spanish press reports in April previously had identified as among a five-person ad hoc team heading ETA's military operations following the arrest of the group's latest military chief, is suspected of being involved in a shoot-out in France in June that wounded a gendarme in the hand. He also may have been involved in the shooting deaths of two gendarmes in Capbreton, France in December, 2007. Iurgi Garitaoitia may have been involved in the shooting deaths of a Basque businessman December 2008 and a former Socialist councilman in March 2008. Itziar Plaza, one of the senior-most women in ETA's military cell, had been an ETA member for six years and may also have been involved in the June 2009 shoot-out mentioned above. The trio was armed with pistols when they were arrested. Police seized a car filled with false license plates, fake ID kits, cash and materials to make a hide-out for weapons and explosives.

¶4. (SBU) Other recent important arrests include a joint French-Spanish operation on June 25 detained ETA's intelligence chief Javier Arruabarrena Carlos and his deputy, Ohiane Garmendia Marin, in Paris. Two days earlier, the Spanish National Police (SNP) arrested three suspected ETA members in a raid that took place in an industrial warehouse in Usurbil, a town in the Basque Country province of Guipuzcoa. Police also seized 70 kilograms of explosives. Those arrested had no criminal background but are suspected of planning an attack on the construction of a high-speed train network in the Basque Country, a longtime target of ETA's. Two other ETA members fell into the lap of French security forces on June 30 when they surrendered after being involved in a traffic accident. Spanish press reports describe one of the two, Ibai Mateo Esparza, as being on the Civil Guard's most wanted list. Meanwhile, an ETA member detained in April (See Ref A) may be more important than authorities originally thought. When Ekaitz Sirvent was

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arrested in Paris in April, police originally described him as ETA's top forger. After an analysis of the contents of his laptop, 10 USB memory sticks, three hard drives and about 30 CDs that he was carrying, authorities now suspect Sirvent may have been an important member of ETA's political wing, "if not its chief," according to one Spanish newspaper.

¶5. (SBU) The Civil Guard on June 13 disrupted a jailbreak plot as part of Operation "Txoko." Seven ETA members were arrested for their alleged involvement in a scheme to break out two terrorists serving a sentence in a Huelva prison. Rubalcaba publicly speculated that "besides freeing two of its gunmen, ETA was trying to raise troop morale." ETA members reportedly planned to kidnap family members of a helicopter pilot to force the pilot to transport the escaped prisoners to Portugal. In a separate disrupted plot, French and Spanish security services uncovered plans by ETA to assassinate Investigating Judge Baltasar Garzon - who has been a thorn in ETA's side for two decades and has played a huge role in diminishing the group's capacities - by sending him poisonous cognac disguised as a gift from an admirer.

¶6. (SBU) On June 30, the ECHR unanimously upheld the Spanish court's 2003 ban on ETA's political wing, Herri Batasuna and Batasuna. Citing Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the groups had appealed to the ECHR on the grounds that their rights to freedom and expression had been violated. However, the ECHR ruled that the parties' links to ETA were contrary to the overall goal of democracy.

//ETA's First Victim of 2009//

¶7. (SBU) Having concluded a recent reflection period on its strategy, the group has decided to continue its armed campaign. Even so, ETA informed Spanish television that although it will continue its terrorist attacks in other parts of Spain, the group was considering instituting

periodic six-month truces in the Basque Country itself in order to facilitate the separatist movement. However, the group has not yet declared such a truce and on June 19 claimed its first victim of the year. Eduardo Pueyes Garcia, a Chief Inspector in the SNP's intelligence wing who had worked against the ETA target for years, died in a car bomb blast in Arrigorriaga, 40 miles south of Bilbao. His death was the first assassination of a member of the SNP in years, the first fatality by ETA in 2009, and the first since the inauguration of Socialist regional premier Patxi Lopez. In a major change of policy, Lopez's new administration - a declared ETA target - is undertaking a strong effort to eliminate all posters, banners, murals, etc. in the Basque country that glorify ETA members as martyrs for the cause of Basque nationalism.

¶8. (SBU) Despite the wave of recent arrests, ETA also managed to conduct another recent attack, which may be the first of the group's traditional summer campaign of minor bombings to show the public that it is still active. ETA is suspected of being behind an explosion that damaged the Basque Socialist Party municipal offices in Durango on July 10. The explosion left no injuries or fatalities, but caused nearly \$100,000 in damages to the building.

CHACON